

“Among the Shells, Planting Seeds”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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Something happened this week in our nation that offers us some hope. It offers us an opportunity for hope. The event that has happened, at first, does not look like an event that offers much hope at all. I want to lift up this event because this event that I’m going to speak about in just a second is one example of an event that has been happening again, and again, and again in our culture for some time now, and these types of events that are happening, to me at least, appear to gain less and less attention every time they happen. I’m not sure why this is, but it is almost as if we just don’t have the strength to look at it anymore.

Now, the event that I’m talking about, of course, is the latest mass shooting that has happened in our country. Elliot Rodger, a 22-year-old male, killed six people and himself out in California earlier this week, and in the wake of this shooting, there were, of course, other shootings going on around our nation. In fact, I dug up the figures in the week prior to this latest mass shooting. We had 80 other shootings that took place, but in the wake of Elliot Rodger’s shooting, we, of course, had the usual voices that were weighing in on this latest tragedy, trying to assign blame for why this happened.

It is a routine event that we hear the voices in the media point fingers and trying to make a case for why this one happened, and the usual voices include: this happened because of guns, this happened because of violent video games, this happened because of the violence that comes out of Hollywood in our movies, this happened because of the lack of mental health care in our medical system, or that this happened because of this individual’s hatred of women.

I suspect that this sort of effort to find someone or something to blame is indicative of our desperation in these situations. I also suspect that all of these possible reasons for this shooting played a part, that there was not just one reason these shootings take place, but I also suspect... and I use the word “suspect” because I don’t know. None of us knows why these things are happening. We can only look at them and think about it and struggle with it. I think that all of these different reasons that are being lifted up for the potential shooting are probably a part of why this happened, but I do not think these are really the causes. Guns, video games, Hollywood violence, mental health care, and hatred of women...I’m not sure that these are the primary causes. I suspect that these are the symptoms—the symptoms of something much, much deeper that is going on in our culture.

I have to tell you that this is a new position for me as I think about shootings, whether they are in schools or post offices or college campuses or wherever, because I used to think that it was, indeed, one or two of these reasons why these shootings take place, but I listened this week to the voice of a friend of the Rodger family, who knew this young, 22-year-old man, Elliot, and who said this to a journalist who was reporting on the shooting. This friend of the Rodger family said “Elliot Rodger was the loneliest person I had ever seen in my life”. That inside perspective from a family friend saying that Elliot Rodger was the loneliest person has changed my thinking about shootings in our culture because what that comment reveals is a truth, I think, about American culture, and the truth is that we, in America, are a very lonely people. We are a very lonely people because we, long ago, gave up community and community standards for the idols of individualism and self-autonomy and greed and stuff. The neighborhood in the United States has been dead for a long time, so every time we have the next shooting, one of the things we tend to hear about is what a loner this person was.

Our response to these shootings is to increasingly just ignore them. They are increasingly taking the back pages of our newspapers, but we handle them almost in a systematic way. We gather together in that

community. We light some candles, and we say “Let the healing begin”.

Our Bible would tell us to do something different than just “Let the healing begin”. What I think really needs to happen, and happen soon, is that we need to find a way in our culture to grieve—to grieve the pain and loss that we are watching every single week in our nation. We don’t take time to grieve. We need to weep about what is taking place every single day in our land. We want to rush through the candles and healing and move on to the next day when, in fact, we need to simply look at disaster and cry.

I was thinking about this situation in relation to family therapy. I have been in some family therapy sessions. I have been in some personal therapy sessions. From time to time, life gets to be too much for me, and I need to talk to somebody. I think that is true of all of us. My experience in therapy (whether in the family or just one on one with the therapist) is that in those first two or three sessions with the therapist, what we do is we dance around the issue. We talk about some things, but we don’t really talk about what needs to be talked about. A good therapist, after two or three sessions, will confront me, or confront the family, and say “Do you want to talk about something real, or do you just want to dance around the issue?” When it comes to that moment in the therapy session, it is often a moment when tears are shed. It is a time when we get to the core of the problem and, if we are honest, we start to weep like a baby because the pains in our lives are real, and when we share them with someone, it hurts to let them out. That, of course, is exactly what we need to do when we are in therapy because that is how we can help people.

Our culture needs to get beyond the first two or three sessions. We need to weep as a nation because things have gone terribly wrong, and we all know it. We all know it, but we have a hard time really admitting to it or saying it publicly, so what we do is we cover it over with platitudes about how great we are, of how we are exceptional, of how we are the leader of the free world, and so forth and so on, when what we actually need to do is step back and say “Something is not right”.

This is the mission of the church. This is the call of the church in the first century with Jesus. It is the call of the church in the 21st century with us, to be a place where we can enter that fourth therapy session and say “Man, you are right. Things are not correct, are not healthy in our lives and in our world. God, help us. God, let us cry. Let us share the pains that we are having in our lives, in our families, in our community, in our nation. Stop the denial. Free our souls up so that we can really look at what is going on in our world”.

The Gospels give us all these avenues to act, to be the catalyst for healthy dialogue in our culture, for a healthy dialogue in our church, so as we heard from the stories, these parables from Jesus, one of the things that we are supposed to be and do is be seed planters. We, as people of the church, as people of the Gospel, are supposed to plant seeds in our communities that can give us hope.

Jesus talks about the mustard seed. I don’t think that all of you could see the mustard seeds that Rosina gave to all of the kids. That mustard seed is tiny. That parable tells us it is one of the tiniest seeds, but it is also a pungent, fiery seed that burns the mouth and, what anybody will tell you, and what Jesus hints at in the parable, is that when that mustard seed grows, it grows big, and it takes over where it is not wanted. The mustard seed is problematic. It grows where it will. It spreads out. It takes over and becomes a bush of hope.

So, we are to be that community that plants seeds in a world that, right now, is divided by shells... I’m talking about bullet shells on the ground, and the casings are all over America. We are to plant those seeds right in the middle of those shells because we do not want those shells to get the last word.

The passage that Mick (the liturgist) read talked about being witnesses. In that first century church, they were called to be witnesses to Jesus, be witnesses to the Gospel, be witnesses to the ends of the earth. Like the mustard seed, being witnesses has no boundaries. We are to be witnesses wherever we are—here in Greensboro or in India—wherever we happen to be, we are to be witnesses.

I was thinking about what, in fact, does it mean to be a witness in terms of the Gospel? I want to read a quote from William Stringfellow, who wrote a book some years ago called An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land. Here is what Stringfellow writes about: What does it mean to be a witness? To follow Jesus, it means in the face of death, live humanly. In the middle of chaos, celebrate word. Amidst babble, I repeat, speak the truth. Confront the noise and verbiage and falsehood of death through the truth and falsity and efficacy of the word of God. Know the word, teach the word, nurture the word, preach the word, defend the word, incarnate the word, do the word, live the word. More than that, in the word of God, expose death and all of death's works and wiles, rebuke lies, cast out demons, exorcise, cleanse the possessed, raise those who are dead in mind and conscience. That is what it is to be a witness. It is to identify the powers of death in our land and confront them so that everyone can see them.

Finally, to be people who plant seeds, it is to build places of sanctuary. The church is to be a place of sanctuary. It is where people come for safety. It is where people come for spiritual sustenance, for fellowship, for community, for hope, and where they come to learn a new way of living, and where they can struggle together to be planters of hope.

That is what we are called to do as Peace Church. We are called to plant the seeds of God's kingdom, to plant these seeds in the midst of a land that is littered with shells and death, and we are to plant and build up a new order in the midst of the one that is dying before our eyes. The good news of all of this is that God, through the power and ministry of Jesus Christ, is with us and calling us to go, calling us out into the world to go and plant, and part of that planting, part of that ability to go out with courage and strength and to plant the seeds of a new order is to first grieve the death of the old order.

So, my hope is that, as the church of Jesus Christ, one expression of that church can be people who find ways to grieve so we can heal and then go forward to plant, and when we do, we know that God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ, is with us and calling us forward. Amen.